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ABSTRACT

University forensic programs offer original opportunities for small group communication research. Scholars have been calling for research in a naturalistic setting. A prime place for these studies exists in academic departments, within forensic programs. Forensic programs meet the standards set forth by prominent scholars for effective small group research. A longitudinal study could indicate how group goals, norms, standards, and roles of leadership change through a group's history. Research could also consider the impact of assigned leadership on a group, and additional role research could focus on how members interact depending on the environment. Not only can forensics be an effective skill- and character-building activity, but it can also be the site for cutting-edge research. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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Forensics and Small Group Communication

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On any given weekend, forensic teams climb into vans and travel to tournaments. Each one of these teams constitutes a group, and it seems that every weekend new group dynamics occur. Forensic teams and their members are a unique setting for communication scholars to study group interactions.

The study of small group communication has become an important research area in the discipline of communication studies. However, there have been concerns raised about the way researchers conduct research of the communication phenomenon in the small group (Cragen & Wright, 1990; McGrath, 1991; Poole, 1990; Putnam & Stohl, 1990; Sykes, 1990).

Cragen and Wright (1980) decried the commonplace use of zero-history laboratory groups in small group communication research and called for an increase in the use of naturalistic groups. Their 1990 synthesis and critique of small group research found that only 13% of small group communication research in the 1980's used natural groups. Sixty of 72 quantitative studies "involved concocted groups composed of college students in classroom settings" (p. 214).

A 1990 special issue of Communication Studies critiqued the study of small group communication. The most critical concern among small group scholars appears to be the rare use of "bona fide" groups in our research (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). This paper argues that forensic programs are bona fide groups and offers ideas for using our programs as the site for research within the small group communication context.

Forensic Programs as small groups

Bormann (1970; 1980) articulated an ongoing criticism of small group scholarship--the use of zero-history groups in our research. This problem continues to haunt the disclipline. Cragen and Wright (1990) argue that our "research continues to create designs that contain a minimal definition of a small decision-making group; namely, three-person, zero-history, thirty-minute groups" (p. 214). To alleviate this problem, Cragen and Wright conclude "there is a great need for research that takes existing small group communication theory and demonstrates its utility to small group problems in applied settings" (p. 228).

Sykes (1990) claims that we need to explore the practical problems people have when exchanging messages

in group settings. He goes on to claim that surveys and data analysis are not relevent because we lack descriptive data. We need to identify the kinds of small groups that exist and the kinds of messages that are exchanged. To address these concerns, we must use naturalistic groups for our research.

Putnam and Stohl (1990) argue that small group research has to move beyond the Cragen and Wright (1980; 1990) and Sykes' (1990) call for research using naturalistic groups, to consider our research from the perspective of "bona fide" groups. They argue that researchers need to expand their horizons to view the dynamic and interdependent boundaries of groups differently. A bona fide group approach to research stands in sharp contrast to studies which use the container metaphor of a group.

Instead of seeing members as contained in a group, Putnam and Stohl (1990) argue that "individuals, groups, and larger social systems exist in a symbolic relationship in which each contributes to the other's development and survival" (p. 256). The individuals constitute the group and the group consititutes the individuals. It is this system of symbiosis that

underlies their definition of a bona fide group, "the criteria for which are stable but permeable boundaries and interdependence with immediate context" (p. 256).

Considering the educational benefits of forensic programs, Raymond Zeuschner (1992) argues that forensic program administrators have historically justified the cost of our activity through the educational value of the group activity. He argues that members of our teams learn leadership, research, critical thinking and small group communication skills (p. 57). The forensic program meets each aspect of Shaw's (1981) definition of a small group. Zueschner claims, "the numbers are right, the motivation to remain part of a group is present, goals are usually overt, there exists an organization of roles, there is interdependence, and the participants certainly perceive themselves as part of a group" (p. 58). It is our contention that forensic programs offer an excellent natural setting for group research from Putnam and Stohl's (1990) perspective.

Competition is the stable boundry. The members are involved in individual speaking or debate activities. However, these boundaries are permeable,

in that new students enter our programs and others leave consistently. The dynamics of the group changes as these events occur. In fact, I have heard many coaches discuss how each weekend it seems they have a new group of students--even if it is the same team that traveled the previous week. This makes sense when we consider the concept of interdependence with the immediate context. Putnam and Stohl define this concept as the way a group depends on and contributes to its environment. They claim that interdependence develops form a referencing system of interlocked behaviors, message patterns, and interpretive frames within and between groups (p. 257). Each tournament offers a new environment for the group involved and members attitudes and behaviors are influenced by those within their team and other competitors. It would be enlightening to consider how the members respond to these changes in group roles, norms, standards, etc.

Forensic programs meet the standards set forth by prominent scholars for effective small group research. It appears that the forensic lounge, van, and tournament site are excellent places for the small group researcher to spend time. We will now turn our

attention to the types of projects that could benefit from using forensic programs as the site of research.

Research Suggestions

Forensic programs may be used to advance small group communication research beyond the problems associated with concocted groups. McGrath (1991) argued that our research should focus on the nature, interaction and performance of groups. The issues we should focus on, then, concern the complexity of groups, their multiple functions, purposefulness of their activity, their place within a larger system or social context, goals, activities toward achievement and policy choices. The forensic program can provide a research site that highlights the dynamics of an on-going group with a past, present and future. It is an exceptionally good site for longitudinal research into small group dynamics. In this section, we will discuss several scholarly projects that may use the forensic program as a research site.

First, we should look to validating the concept of the "bona fide" group. Using the standards set forth by Putnam and Stohl (1990), the forensic program should become a site for descriptive studies considering the

elements of a "bona fide" group. This research project could strengthen the conceptualization of a group. It would provide insight into how members affect the dynamics of the group and how the group may constitute the individual. These insights about the individual may even increase our awareness of the intra and interpersonal concepts of self image. Additionally, we may come to a deeper awareness of social and environmental impacts on group communication.

A longitudinal study could indicate how group goals, norms, standards, and roles of leadership change through a group's history. Forensic programs are an exceptionally good site for a longitudinal study. Frequently, students enter and leave the program. The impact of these actions on the group varies depending on the person, their role in the group, etc. Additionally, the actions of entering and leaving a group occur naturally in "the real world," but more than likely, these changes occur less often. This means that the forensic program may allow us to report pertinent and accurate information more quickly than we could in another context.

It may be interesting to consider the impact of assigned leadership on a group. A hierarchy exists in forensics with team member leaders, graduate assistant coaches, assistant directors and directors of forensics. It may be interesting to consider programs with many coaches versus those with simply a director. Research may look at the level of group respect given to emerging leaders versus assigned leaders. Additionally, a study may consider the roles of leaders in different facets of the activity (ie. what are the characteristics of leaders who are followed by students involved in interpretation events versus those in limited preparation or public address events).

Additional role research could focus on how members interact depending on the environment. Do we find members communicating differently or taking on new roles when they are at the tournament site versus when they are in the van, or in the team lounge? What types of communication interactions take place when groups are trying to pass time on the long ride to the tournament in comparison to when they are at the tournament, making descisions, chatting between rounds, eating a team meal. These issues respond to Hewes'

(1986) argument that we spend too much time researching decision-making roles and not enough considering how communication is involved in group interactions. How are new group members assimilated onto the team? What about the dynamics of coalitions and cliques that occur on some teams? Is the notion of groupthink prominent among team members? And how about analyzing a team through fantasy theme? Forensics provides numerous opportunities to study communication processes.

Conclusion

The university forensic program offers original opportunities for small group communication research. Our scholars have been calling for research in a naturalistic setting. A prime place for these studies exist in our own departments, with our forensic program. Not only can forensics be an effective skill- and character-building activity, but it can also be the site for cutting-edge research.

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